

Background and Problem of Existentialism¹

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I shall confine the discussion to the concept of "existence" as defined in Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* and adopted by Sartre. This concept is more radical than Jaspers' notion of existence which is a middle term between *Dasein* and *Transzendenz*. Within this restriction I shall outline the historical background of Existentialism, in order to show that radical Existentialism is a true impasse which opens the possibility of recapturing pre-modern views of existence, i.e. of man's existence either within the framework of the classical theory of the *eternity of the World*, or within the framework of the Christian *doctrine of Creation*. Confronting Existentialism with Aristotle and Augustine, I take it for granted that Existentialism is more than an ultra-modern fashion and also more than a kind of philosophical depression of a decaying bourgeoisie as its Marxist opponents want to make us believe. To bring out its ultimate implications and consequences, Existentialism has to be confronted not with any contemporary academic philosophy but with Greek theory and Christian faith. Existentialism is "modern" by being neither classic nor Christian.

According to Heidegger it is the privilege of man as *Dasein* that he can and must ask about the meaning of Being. With the emergence of human *Dasein* an inroad occurs into the whole of beings which opens the understanding of Being as such. Man is a being which in his being is concerned with it, and thereby open for its comprehension. "To-be" is a sheer factuality and at the same time an existential task. We are responsible to our being without being responsible for being-

¹ The following discussion extends and supplements my article in *Social Research*, September 1948 (New York).

there. This *Da-sein* which is thrust upon itself and into the world, and, at the same time, transcends itself and the world, Heidegger calls "existence". It is a *geworfener Entwurf*, a sheer factuality and at the same time a constant possibility, a *Faktizität* and a *Sein-Können*. If, says Heidegger, one can speak at all about man's "essence" or nature, then this so called essence is implied in and absorbed by the fact *that* he is and *has-to-be*, i.e. in his existence. *That* I am precedes all possible definitions of *what* I am: a rational animal, an *ens creatum*, a compound of body and soul.

The whole world, too, is an existential structure, constituted by man's own being-in-the-world. Thrown into the world, man is for this very reason projecting himself and his world. He is an ek-static existence, yet totally worldly.

As a sheer factuality of worldly existence man has no wisdom about his whence and whither. Hence he feels the more intensely the sheer fact of his being-there. In boredom, anxiety and the anticipation of death, man is confronted with nothingness and by stretching out into nothingness he becomes aware of being as such — of the amazing fact (in one passage Heidegger calls it "the miracle of all miracles") *that there is something at all, and not nothing*. Man alone can ask the radical question: why this and *not* that; why thus and *not* otherwise; why is there anything at all and *not* nothing? The freedom of asking these questions is, however, bound up with a factual, contingent, finite existence. We are, as Sartre says, "condemned to freedom" and projecting. Our existential freedom of questioning every extant existence is in itself ground - and bottomless, incapable of grounding freely itself. For no human *Da-sein* has ever freely decided whether it wants to be or to exist. This is very briefly and roughly Heidegger's concept of existence, as developed in *Sein und Zeit*.

Sartre adopted Heidegger's analysis in principle but elaborated with great literary skill and psychological penetration the character of contingency, to the point of "absurdity". In his novel *La Nausée* he describes a natural existence, something extant or *en-soi*, uncomplicated by self-transcendence.

Sitting in a park on a bench he notices the root of a chestnut tree. All of a sudden he has an inspiration which takes his breath away. He realizes once for all what it means "to exist". Ordinarily we do not notice abstract, pure existence but concrete things in a definite setting

and functional relatedness. We see a chestnut tree and its roots near a bench in a park. But when we become aware of its unqualified, naked, shameless existence all its concrete qualities vanish. Reversing Husserl's method of reduction Sartre brackets not real existence but all essences, in order to bring out the *absolute* character of existence in its frightful contingency and fundamental absurdity. It is irreducible, nameless and fascinating, before and beyond all explanation. The obtrusive simplicity of being-there can only be encountered. Existence is *gratuitousness itself*: gratuitousness of this tree and park, bench and city, of myself, and of the whole world. One cannot even ask where it all came from nor how it came about "that a world rather than nothing exists". There is no cause or reason why it should exist. "*Quelle saleté*", what a mess — these "tons of existence", suffocating us under the weight of a tremendous nausea. There are people, Sartre says, who have understood this, long before Existentialism came into its own. But they tried to overcome this absolute contingency by projecting a being — God — that is not contingent but necessary and its own cause, an essential existence.

The historic and systematic significance of the existentialist thesis seems to me that it sums up the whole modern movement in its ultimate consequences. It concentrates with an appalling radicality the philosophical quest in the one zero-point of existence. It has ruled out all halfway positions by focusing everything on the "one thing needful" — though we need perhaps another answer to its question.

If we now ask ourselves: how old is modern Existentialism, the answer depends on valuation and perspective. I venture to say that it is much older than Schelling's and Kierkegaard's attacks upon Hegel's seeming reconciliation of essence and existence. It already begins with Pascal and Descartes. Our modernity was born with the revolutionary dissolution of the ancient conviction — classic and Christian — that man has a definite *nature* and *place* in the whole of being, while modern man "exists", out of place, in extreme situations in a "human condition". Existentialism indicates a profound displacement and unnaturalness. Nature, as φύσις and κόσμος, is absent in *Sein und Zeit* and *L'Être et le Néant*. In both works man and world are a "project", not given like a gift but assumed as a task. Some deep suspicion about the givenness of things lies at the bottom of the whole modern movement, culminating in Existentialism.

This suspicion became systematically established by Descartes who initiated, by his project of a "new science", long before Kant, the Copernican revolution by means of a radical doubt, about everything, except the doubting act itself. Descartes' doubt about the reliability of our natural world-conception led him to a new certainty in man's own mind which has in itself the principles of science. By means of the new science we can re-construct the world of deceptive appearances on a few simple principles, independent of common sense and ordinary world-conception. The new science of mathematical physics discovered what each child knows nowadays, or believes to know, that the sun which rises every morning and sets every night, which shines, warms and generates, is a crass deception, that the "true", i.e., scientific sun is something entirely different. The true properties of the natural world are merely extension and motion, infinite space and movement without finality, ruled by mathematical laws of mechanical motion. The new world of the new science (which enabled us to fly from New York or from Frankfurt to Mendoza) is no longer, like Aristotle's κόσμος, the *Wahrheit* of a *sinnliche Gewissheit*, nor is it the created universe of Augustine. It is a construction where all places and things are equivalent. In this mechanical world where man has no definite nature and place there is also no place for a "first cause" in the Aristotelian or scholastic sense. In the last analysis there is only one point on which we can stand and rely: the "I am" where doubt coincides with existence: the pure fact *that* I am, in a world which is alien to me, and which is my own world not through a common nature (created or eternal) but only through my projecting construction.

This new science formed the thought of Pascal who was a mathematician but also a passionate Christian. In one of the *Pensées* (par. 72) he describes the fundamental disproportion between man and the universe. If we contemplate the infinite totality of space and time we cannot but recognize that we are unable to comprehend it in our thought. Our whole visible world shrinks in such an infinite perspective into an imperceptible atom within the infinite whole of the universe. We are lost in a remote corner of the universe where we *happen* to exist. In comparison with the universe, our planet, our empires, our cities, and ourselves are nothing.

If we look into the opposite direction toward the infinitely small, we encounter a similar abyss of the incomprehensible. Thus, man is

suspended between the two precipices of the infinitely great and small. What is then his own human condition? To be "a Nothing" in the face of the Infinite and "an All" in the face of the Nothing, a "seeming mean" between two extremes and uninformed about his ultimate ground and purpose. It is a "seeming" mean or middle position because it can be defined only negatively. Too much noise makes us deaf, too much light makes us blind; too weak a sound we cannot hear, too weak a light we do not see. What we can grasp is only an average, a mediocrity. We even cannot bear too much love or benevolence: we will hate and resent it. Thus we always know something but never the whole, our standpoint is a constant floating. Man has no definite nature, place and standpoint, he is *égaré* or displaced. This is our human condition which is as unnatural as it is unsatisfactory because nobody can honestly desire to exist without a firm foundation and purpose between two abysses.

"Quand je considère la petite durée de ma vie, absorbée dans l'éternité précédente et suivante, le petit espace que je remplis et même que je vois, abîmé dans l'infinie immensité des espaces que j'ignore et qui m'ignorent, je m'effraie et m'étonne de me voir ici plutôt que là, car il n'y a point de raison pourquoi ici plutôt que là, pourquoi à présent plutôt que lors. Qui m'y a mis?" (*Pensées*, par. 205). The position of modern man is one of total contingency and absurdity — this is the essence of his existence.

For Pascal this contingency is, however, not the last word. It is rather the starting point for the discovery of a new kind of order. This order is as new as the Cartesian world and without any analogy in classic and scholastic philosophy. It is not a continuous hierarchy but a discontinuous order of three different kinds of being and perfection.

All those who are great in the order of worldly power and possessions, like kings, military leaders, great businessmen, cannot understand the superior greatness of the mind, the men of sciences, art and philosophy who do not need worldly power to be powerful and great. Both, however, the great men of the world and of the mind, are infinitely inferior to the greatness of a Christian saint who needs neither worldly power nor intellectual excellence. He stands in the supernatural order of grace. These three orders of worldly power, spiritual excellence and charity are not degrees of perfection within a continuous hierarchy but separated by principle.

"Tous les corps, le firmament, les étoiles, la terre et ses royaumes, ne valent pas le moindre des esprits; car il connaît tout cela, et soi; et les corps, rien. Tous les corps ensemble, et tous les esprits ensemble, et toutes leurs productions, ne valent pas le moindre mouvement de charité. Cela est d'un ordre infiniment plus élevé". (Pensées, par. 793).

Two hundred years later Kierkegaard reaffirmed Pascal's fundamental question about the "why" of our being here and there, however, with a fateful modification. He was ignorant of and hostile to natural science and to philosophy, and his Christian apologetics is therefore without a frame of reference. Instead of demonstrating a discontinuous order Kierkegaard advocates the paradoxical leap into faith. But even this paradoxical faith is still related to the Cartesian world and method. It is necessary, Kierkegaard once remarked, to intensify Descartes' theoretical doubt into existential despair in order to reach the certainty of faith. Similarly he intensified Pascal's question *Qui m'y a mis?* He writes in *Repetition*: "One sticks one's finger into the soil to tell by the smell in what land one is. I stick my finger into existence — it smells of nothing. Where am I? How came I here? What is this thing called 'world'? Who is it that has lured me into the world and now leaves me there? Why was I not consulted and made acquainted with its manners and customs? How did I obtain an interest in this big enterprise they call reality? Where is the director? I should like to make a remark to him".

This series of rebellious questions repeats in a romantic fashion Pascal's almost mathematical question *Pourquoi ici plutôt que là?* Thus Kierkegaard was even more *égaré* than Pascal for whom the natural universe of modern natural science was still an order, incomplete, yet relevant for the human condition. For Kierkegaard the natural cosmos is a nomansland, entirely irrelevant for an ethical and religious existence — merely extant or *vorhanden* as in Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, a massive *en-soi* as in Sartre's *L'Être et le Néant*. The relative contingency as conceived by Pascal becomes with Kierkegaard and his disciples an absolute absurdity.

Finally a passage from Nietzsche's essay *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinn*. It stands, as to style and content, precisely between the modern scientific outlook and the existential concern. Nietzsche describes man's position thus: *In irgendeinem abgelegenen Winkel des in zahllosen Sonnensystemen ausgegossenen Weltalls gab es*

einmal ein Gestirn auf dem kluge Tiere das Erkennen erfanden. Es war die hochmütigste und verlogenste Minute der 'Weltgeschichte': aber doch nur eine Minute. Nach wenigen Atemzügen der Natur erstarrte das Gestirn und die klugen Tiere mussten sterben. It is, says Nietzsche, as if nature had thrown away the key for our understanding of it. We are living between the four walls of our consciousness while riding half asleep on the back of the great animal Nature from the truth of which we are separated by expedient illusions.

Later, Nietzsche thought that he had rediscovered the truth of Being in the "Dionysian World" of Eternal Recurrence. Revitalizing the Classical doctrine of eternal recurrence, he made an attempt of retranslating man back into nature and its supreme pattern of eternal selfgeneration and selfdestruction. This world needs no creator for it is divine in itself. Nietzsche believed that he had thereby redeemed himself and mankind from the modern chance-existence, *vom Zufall des Daseins*. Man's existence, says Nietzsche, has become more and more random, casual and superfluous within the universe since he has lost the ancient and Christian confidence in his natural place in the whole scheme of beings. Thus he fell into "the thrilling sensation of his own nothingness" of which the modern ambition of being "creative" is but a complementary aspect.

With this attempt of Nietzsche to reintegrate man, who "since Copernicus is rolling away from a center toward an x", into the whole of Being, Existentialism was virtually already at its end. But since Nietzsche declined the Christian answer to the questionable fact of existence, he had to make a desperate effort to recapture a pre-Christian worldview within and against a Christian tradition. Hence so many anti-Christian and thereby Christian elements in his forced will to a cosmic pattern of human existence.

However we may judge Nietzsche's attempt to discover as a "new Columbus" — by way of the new, modern world, and through the experience of nihilism — a most ancient cosmos, his experiment shows at least one thing: that there are only two alternatives to the modern contingency and absurdity of existence: the Aristotelian, or generally speaking, the *Greek theory of the Eternity of the World*, including that of the human race, or the *Christian doctrine of Creation*. In the one case human existence is seen within the framework of a perfect cosmos without beginning and end, in the other case

within the order of creation with a beginning, a center and a consummation.

Only very briefly can I outline these pre-modern alternatives. Three views were held in classical Antiquity with regard to the cosmos, i. e., to heaven and earth, including all living beings on it: 1) The cosmos is created (not in an absolute sense, out of nothing, but out of chaos) and destructible. That is: chaos has been informed into a cosmos and the cosmos is liable to disfiguration. 2) The cosmos, once formed, is indestructible. 3) The cosmos is uncreated and undestructible. The most worthy and least blasphemous theory is, according to Philo's treatise on the Eternity of the World, the latter, of Aristotle: that the cosmos is without beginning and end, selfsufficient and selfcontained. The cosmos as the whole is not affected by disease, age and privation like the particular living beings on our planet. It is orderly, beautiful and good, like God's creation in the story of Genesis. It is furthermore everlasting and always the same. Man has his definite place and nature in this hierarchy of higher and lower spheres of existences and degrees of perfection. The world as a whole is complete, exempt from γένεσις and φθόρα, it is a visible God, and as such demonstrable.

Far from being the result of a phantastic speculation, the Aristotelean view of the world — the only real *Welt-Anschauung* — is an elaboration of natural common sense which does not doubt that the sun will rise and set forever as it did yesterday and will do tomorrow. Within this *Welt-Anschauung* the existentialist question "Why is there anything at all?" and the corresponding emphasis on contingency and absurdity could not arise. That there is something at all was for Aristotle an unquestionable element within an essential structure: the order, beauty and perfection of an already existing universe, including the existence of rational animals, called men. They are distinguished from other animals not by the rational freedom to will and project but by disinterested contemplation. The highest distinction of man is that he is capable of contemplating the perfect hierarchy of an ungenerated and imperishable cosmos. For Aristotle the ultimate source of the philosophical enterprise is amazement, not, however, the modern, bewildered amazement or rather irritation about a contingent existence, but the devout amazement about the hidden principles of the orderly changes.

With Augustine and the Bible we find ourselves in an entirely different spiritual climate. Biblical thinking implies in its fundamental emphasis on creation — from the first sentence of the Old Testament to the first sentence of the Gospel of St. John in the New Testament — a question which was not asked by classical thinking. The story of creation implies what Existentialism takes as its starting point: the contingency of all existence, contingent, however, to a creator who alone is an essential existence. The Christian world is no longer a *Κόσμος*, for there is an absolute difference between Creator and creation. "Of all visible things", says Augustine, "the world is the greatest; of all invisible the greatest is God. That the world is we see; that God is we believe. That God made the world we can believe from no one more safely than from God himself, who through his prophet said: In the beginning God made the heavens and the earth". Compared with the invisible God the orderly and beautiful world is not orderly and beautiful, nor can one even say that it *is* at all. It is true, the whole creation praises its creator but if God does not speak to the soul of man and if man does not ask the right questions he will not recognize God in his creation. Neither common sense nor philosophical sense can reach the ultimate source of existence and man's ultimate quest cannot be answered by what is visible and demonstrable. "I asked the earth", writes Augustine in his *Confessions* (X, 6), "and it answered me: I am not thy God. I asked the sea and the deeps, and they answered me: I am not thy God. I asked the fleeting winds and the whole air with its inhabitants, and they answered me: I am not thy God. I asked the heavens, the sun, the moon and the stars, and they answered me: I am not thy God. I asked the whole frame of the world and it answered me: I am not He but He made us".

Augustine found the answer to his question not, as Aristotle did, by the contemplation of the universe and its motion, but by "turning himself to himself", and to God. Thus, the world becomes transparent for an invisible maker. And if the world, which speaks to everyone the same, yet is dumb and opaque to this man while eloquent and transparent to that man, if it appears as an absolute absurdity to this man and as a *factum* in the literal sense, i. e., as made or created, to another man, this difference does not depend on a different sensual perception and rational understanding but on a difference in the fundamental attitude of man toward the whole of existence. And since the

ultimate quest of Existentialism "Why is there anything at all?" is anti-Christian only by consequence but Christian by derivation, the three possibilities: modern Existentialism, classical Cosmology and Christian doctrine of Creation can be reduced to the single Either-Or of classical and Christian thinking. And if we further assume that the question about the "Why" of existence is at all a meaningful question, we would have to conclude that the doctrine of Creation and modern Existentialism are superior to Greek Cosmology for the simple reason that they pose a more radical question. Aristotle did not pose it, the Bible poses it implicitly and answers it by faith, Existentialism poses it explicitly but is constitutionally incapable of answering its own question — unless suspense and silence in the face of the amazing fact of existence are an answer to an otherwise unanswerable question.